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ABSTRACT

At the heart of the controversy over public education in a democratic system is the tension between majority rules and minority rights, and public and individual interests. This contextual framework sets the stage for the emergence of charter schools in Alberta, Canada. This paper describes the establishment and characteristics of the first charter schools in Alberta, issues and concerns about charter schools in the province, the components of their charters, and problems and obstacles that each of the three schools has faced. A 1993 report released by Alberta Education cites the absence of competition as the primary reason "for the failure of public schools to provide the level of excellence in education necessary for success in an increasingly competitive society." The three schools include: (1) a school for street youth--Boyle Street Co-op Education Centre, Edmonton, Canada; (2) Education for the Gifted (EFG) Charter School, Elk Island School Division, Sherwood Park, Canada; and (3) ABC School for the Gifted and Talented, Calgary, Canada. Although charter schools in Canada are still in the early stages of implementation, they have had a significant impact on public education by making educators reevaluate public education and its role in society. Some school boards have recognized that charter schools provide options for students whose needs are not being met in a traditional system and open access to students who otherwise might not afford the tuition fee. Finally, the new schools have not created a stratified education system. (Contains six references.) (LMI)

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CHARTER SCHOOLS IN ALBERTA

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Charter Schools In Alberta
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Charting a New Course for Public Schools
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The Context

Throughout history public education has reflected the ideals of the society in which it is embedded. At one time it was influenced by the church, then by the state, and now by business and industry attempting to compete in a global economy. It was once the great hope of society - the vehicle by which the underprivileged could gain access to the benefits of the affluent. Public education was designed to not only disseminate knowledge, but to also produce qualitatively better human beings. Today both government and business view education as the engine that will drive economic and social prosperity in an increasingly competitive global marketplace. The key capital asset of the post-industrial information age is knowledge and intelligence, placing education at the centre of the knowledge society and school as its key institution. The performance of schools and the basic knowledge, skills and values taught has become a central concern to society as a whole and is no longer considered to be a professional matter best left in the hands of "educators." As a consequence, the demands placed upon the public education system by both government and the private sector is accountability for high learning standards and quality programs that equip students to compete in the global marketplace.

However, in an increasingly pluralistic and metropolitanized society the continuation of a public education system that can accommodate the diverse educational needs and value orientations of a heterogeneous community becomes problematic. Traditionally public schooling has served to create social cohesion and national identity by teaching everyone the common language, history and culture of the nation, and by providing them with skills to participate in democratic communities. Public schooling served to forge bonds of common memory and civic obligation, while eliminating factitious

distinctions among fellow citizens (Ravitch,1991; Barber, 1993). Today there is a lack of consensus regarding the role and purpose of schooling in society, and little agreement as to what the philosophical/ideological orientation of public schooling ought to be. State attempts to control the substance of education is viewed as a mechanism to regulate thought through the imposition of a particular ideology and as a form of cultural coercion.

At the heart of the controversy over public education in a democratic system is the tension between majority rules and minority rights, and public and individual interests. The issue is "who should control the socialization of children?" The problem is manifested in the debate over privatization, charter schools, and parental choice in the education of their children.

What does the lack of consensus in how children should be taught, the increase in parental voice and choice in education, the influence of business and industry and the commodification of knowledge and intelligence mean for the structure and governance of public education in the near future?

Role of Government

The predominant government response to the lack of consensus over the role and purpose of public education and the need to make education more responsive to the labor needs of the global market place is to restructure schools based on principles of corporate managerialsim and economic rationalism practiced by the business community. Chubb and Moe (1990) argue that democratic control of public schools leads to large bureaucracies and complex demands rendering them inefficient and unresponsive to client demands. Private schools subject to market forces encourage responsiveness to their clientele and the development of highly differentiated set of offerings relative to public schools (Levin, 1992).

It is the belief of right wing governments that they can reduce spending and ensure quality instruction by having schools behave like the private sector and compete for clients in an open market. Government will establish the framework or goals of education and

give schools and the community freedom in achieving them. In other words, they will establish performance standards, curriculum guidelines, provide basic financial support, and monitor and evaluate results. The outcome is that public education will be competency based, service oriented and driven by market forces that will dictate which methods, schools, or institutions will survive.

This perspective and the arguments and tensions inherent in it provide the contextual framework for the emergence of charter schools in Alberta. The purpose of this paper is to describe the establishment of the first charter schools in Canada.

Why Charter Schools In Alberta?

In a recent report released by Alberta Education (1993) entitled *Charter Schools: Provision for Choice in Public Schools*, they provide an overview of the charter school concept, the strengths and limitations of such an approach, and a summary of existing charter school programs in Great Britain, Australia and the United States. In the document they report the absence of competition as the primary reason for "the failure of public school to provide the level of excellence in education necessary for success in an increasingly competitive society." Proponents of charter school suggest that by "allowing parents to choose their children's schools will help to replace top-down control with accountability to the marketplace, and to focus educators' attention on serving children and families, rather than on meeting the demands of regulators and bureaucrats" (p.4).

Alberta Education (1995) presents charter schools as an extension of the educational services offered within the existing public education system. The expectation is that charter schools will be different from and complementary to the educational services locally available, and will vary across the province. "It is the intent that successful educational practices experienced in these schools will be recognized and adopted by other public schools for the benefit of more Albertans" (p.1).

While charter schools are expected to provide different educational environments to improve student learning, Alberta Education identifies seven distinguishing characteristics *common* to charter schools that set them apart from other public schools in the province. These characteristics are outlined in the *Charter School Handbook* (1995) and summarized below.

1. **Charter:** "A charter is an agreement between a school board or the Minister of Education and an individual or group regarding the establishment and administration of a school." The charter describes the "unique educational service the school will provide, how the school will operate, and the student outcomes it intends to achieve" (p.2).

2. **Purpose:** The purposes for establishing charter schools are the following:

   •to stimulate the development of enhanced and innovative programs within public education;

   •to provide increased opportunities for student learning within public education;

   •to provide parents and students with greater opportunities for choice within the public education system;

   •to provide teachers with a vehicle for establishing schools with enhanced and creative methods of educational instruction, and school structure and management;

   •to encourage the establishment of outcomes-based education programs (p.5).

3. **Specialization:** "Charter schools will specialize in a particular educational service to address a specific need. They may complement or add to existing local programs where there are a sufficient number of students who could benefit from the program" (p.2).

4. **Governance:** "A charter schools is operated by a corporate body." A charter board will represent parents and teachers of students in the charter school and may be constituted by the corporate body to govern the charter school. "Where a distinct charter board is not

formed, then the board of directors for the corporation shall be the charter board.... The charter board must have by-laws and policies for governance of the boards as well as for the governance of the charter school" (p.2).

5. Autonomy: "A charter board has the authority and autonomy to run the day-to-day operations of the school. A charter board will develop policies subject to its charter agreement with the local school board or the Minister of Education. These policies need not comply with nor be congruent to those of the local school board" (p.2).

6. Accountability: "The charter board is accountable for the charter school" and for "ensuring that it complies with charter board policies, the terms of the charter, and provincial legislation, regulation and policies" (p.2).

A charter board is also accountable to the local school board or to the Minister of Education depending upon who established the charter school. Which ever the case may be, they must ensure that the charter school is operated according to the charter, and achieves the results outlined in the charter and as required by provincial legislation, regulation and policies (p.3).

7. Choice: " A charter school will provide enhanced or innovative delivery of public education to students. This means that parents and students have increased opportunity to choose an education that best serves student needs" (p.3).

Process for Acquiring Charter Status

The government of Alberta made a commitment to approve up to 15 charter schools for start up in September 1995. Of the 14 applicants five were approved and of those three were ready to operate in September. Two of the charter schools are directed toward meeting the needs of the gifted and talented and had their charter status granted by local school

boards. Two other charter schools were private schools that elected to become a school of choice in the public education system. One of these schools is devoted to personal excellence through mastery learning and offers a more traditional European approach to education. The other school is devoted to the Suzuki method of teaching music, and this approach is reflected in the school philosophy. Both of these "conversion" schools were granted their charter status from the Minister of Education. The last school to achieve charter status, also granted by the Minister, was a school for at risk students.

Alberta Education has provided a *Charter School Handbook* to assist people interested in applying for charter school status. The Handbook outlines seven areas that must be addressed in a proposal, and outlines the steps charter organizers need to take in making their application. The Handbook clearly states that individuals and groups interested in establishing a charter school should first "work with their local school board to develop a program in the local system." "If they believe that their children's needs cannot be met directly by the local school board, then they may choose to apply for charter status" (p.5). The applicants must be able to demonstrate that there is sufficient commitment from parents and students to ensure that a viable program can be offered, and that there is a body of research to support that the proposed chart will potentially improve student learning (p.5).

Defining Characteristics of Charter Schools in Alberta

The focus of charter schools in Alberta is on providing basic education in alternative ways that improve student learning. It is the Government's intent that charter schools augment or compliment programs offered in the public education system, rather than compete with these program. Charter schools encourage creative methods of educational instruction , school structure and management, and focus on outcomes based education programs. The *Charter School Handbook* reinforces the position that *charter schools are public schools* in defining the guiding framework for these schools in the province. For

example, Charter schools cannot deny access to any student as long as there is sufficient space and resources available. If the student is denied access to a charter school then the student or parents of the student may appeal the decision to the Minister of Education. Charter schools cannot charge tuition's fees, are non-sectarian, and "the curriculum delivered must be structured around a basic education as defined by Alberta Education and described in the Programs of Study." All students attending a charter school are expected to write Provincial Achievement Tests, Grade 12 Diploma Exams and any other tests the Minister prescribes (p.3).

Charter schools are funded on a per student basis. They are eligible for the same grants as public schools with the exception of capital (building) and transportation grants (p.4). The rationale for the exclusion of these grants is directly related to economics. The government argues that there is sufficient vacant space in existing school buildings to accommodate charter schools. With regard to bussing, the government is concerned with the duplication of services. They encourage charter boards to enter into agreements with existing public school boards to access their existing transportation system for charter school students. If such an agreement is made, the public school board can access the transportation grant for the charter school children.

Charter schools are non-profit schools and are to be operated by non-profit corporate entities. Charter boards are regulated by the Labour Relations Code and the Employment Standard Code and must employ certified teachers. Unless a teacher has contractual relations with an existing public school board (e.g., secondment, leave of absence) charter school teachers cannot be full members of the Alberta Teachers' Association (p.3-4).

Charter schools are expected to submit an annual audited financial statement to the Minister, and are publicly accountable for student achievement in their schools. As part of the public system of schools, students of charter schools or their parents are able to ask the

Minister to review any charter board decision regarding expulsion of a student, the amount and payments of fees or costs, and the denial of access to a charter school.

Issues and Concerns Regarding Charter Schools In Alberta

Despite the government's attempt to present charter schools as schools of choice within the public education, the concerns raised by representatives of the Alberta Teachers' Association, parent groups, and critics of the current government's approach to restructuring education have cast charter schools in a different light. A review and content analysis of regional and local news paper articles released during the period from January 1994 to September 1995 revolve around five central issues:

1. Charter schools are elitist and contribute to the establishment of a two tiered educational system because they encourage the segregation or streaming of students. The concern being that charter schools will provide top end programs for bright, highly able learners and relegate the undesirable, difficult to teach students to the public school system. These concerns were raised by teachers, trustees, and school administrators in response to the granting of charter status to two schools for students identified as being gifted and talented.

2. Excessive experimentation could be harmful to students. The Alberta Teachers' Association viewed the public school system as the most appropriate place to test innovation. They argued that public schools have the resources and support systems to create a safety net to soften the crash of unsuccessful innovations. The Alberta Middle School Association viewed charter schools as unnecessary because open school boundaries already provide parents and students with choice, and alternative programs within the public system permit innovation and experimentation.

3. Charter schools are an attack on the power and solidarity of teacher professional associations because teachers in these schools need not be, and in some cases cannot be members of the Alberta Teachers' Association. Therefore charter school teachers are not part of the collective bargaining process.

4. Charter schools threaten the survival of local public schools by diminishing their enrollments through choice and competition.

5. Charter schools do not protect the public interest because charter school teachers as not members of the Alberta Teachers' Association, and therefore are not subject to the terms of their professional code of conduct, and do not have the legal framework to police teachers' professional conduct. The also do not protect the public interest because charter schools operate at the behest of the values and beliefs of a small group of like minded individuals. Only those attending the charter schools, funded out of public dollars, benefit from the innovations in these schools.

THE FIRST THREE CHARTER SCHOOLS IN ALBERTA

Boyle Street Co-op Education Centre, Edmonton, Alberta

Background

The Boyle Street Community Services Co-op is a collaborative service centre that brings together counselors and resource people from a variety of social and community service agencies who have a commitment to helping residents of the inner city to establish a community centre that addresses unique needs that are not adequately addressed by existing institutions.

The Boyle Street Co-op Education Centre evolved from an outreach and educational counseling program for inner city street-involved youth and adults, sponsored by Alberta Social Services through the Boyle Street Co-op. Established in 1987, the outreach

program provided significant services for people who viewed the inner city as their community, and often were dealing with problems of poverty, racism as well as social problems including histories of physical and sexual abuse, addictions, criminal involvement and frequent stays in institutional care. In 1991 the Co-op developed an *Alternative Education Program* that served youth between the ages of 12 and 19, as well adults interested in acquiring the level of education necessary to become employed. It was the success of this program that provided the foundations for the Charter School.

The Boyle Street Community

The Co-op is located in the heart of the inner city, wedged between the downtown core and Edmonton's skid row. It is home to the vagrant, and those dealing with problems of mental illness, drug and alcohol addiction, poverty and racism. The majority of participants are aboriginal, and the majority are unemployed and in need of income security and housing.

The Co-op offers a housing registry, mental health programs and an AIDS prevention program that includes a needle exchange. The Facility provides space for a drop-in centre, an activity centre, an aboriginal cultural room and a community social centre.

Establishing the Need for a Charter School

The Boyle Street Co-op Education Centre was established to recruit youth from a life on the street and to provide a safe environment for them to acquire basic education that is focused on life skills and job readiness. The youth that are attracted to the Boyle Street Co-op Education Centre are ones who have little chance in making it a traditional school system. While these students come from around the city they feel comfortable in the Boyle Street Community and at an Education Centre located on their familiar territory. A student from the Centre describes the needs of street youth.

> Street youth need a place to go to where they can feel safe and talk to someone for support and not be scared that they are going to get ratted out, or looked down upon for the lifestyle they lead. I don't believe that trying to get kids off the street is going to work. People look at life on the street as a terrible thing, but for some people it is the best and safest way to go. Most of the time it's safer that their homes. The reason most kids are on the street is because they feel unsafe and unwanted at home, they try to look for someone or something that will replace that void in their lives.

In general few of the students have an adequate level of knowledge and skill to be engaged in course work leading to a high school diploma. The majority of these 12 to 19 year olds are at an elementary or at best a junior high school level of learning. Students in the program are rewarded with credits for work experience, and the curriculum is designed to respect their life experiences and life style as well as their needs as learners. The students characterize their school as a "place they can handle," where "you can get special help for people that have trouble reading, writing and with math." It is an Education Centre for up-grading with the goal of "helping teens to get off the streets and back into school."

As an extension of the Boyle Street Community Co-op the Education Centre provides additional services such as a youth housing project, health outreach and counseling services. A hot lunch is served everyday. The students who share in the responsibility of preparing and serving the meal gain credit for special projects. The Education Centre operates on a year round basis and currently has 65 registered students, and 25 of these students attend on a regular basis. They are expected to have 75 students enrolled in the program by September 1996. Currently there are two full-time teacher/social workers that work with students who are divided into learning/ability groups.

Why a Charter?

The majority of the professional staff at the Boyle Street Community Co-op have a background or experience in the realm of social work. The decision to seek charter status for their alternative education program grew out of the success of the program and the need

to secure a more stable source of funding. Acquiring charter status provided a mechanism for them to create opportunities for street youth to gain an education under terms that recognize their alternative lifestyle choices and educational needs. Due to the vast range in ability of the students the Centre wanted flexibility to deliver courses in alternative ways, unconstrained by the policy and regulations of the established public system.

While the public education system was willing to acknowledge the school as an alternative program within the system, the Centre rejected this request on the grounds that they wanted to remain intimately connected to the Boyle Street Community Co-op because it was a source of identity and comfort for the students. They also rejected offers from various groups to host the school in some of the corporate/city owned facilities in the downtown core. For example, the students would not feel comfortable in a corporate office, or in one of the office spaces available at the downtown public library. For street youth to attend the school it had to be on their own safe territory and on their terms. For example, schooling is year round and school hours are Monday to Friday from 10:00 am to 3:30 pm.

The education centre is run on shoe-string with the many of the educational services offered by volunteers from the University of Alberta and Grant McEwan Community College under the supervision of two experienced teachers. The Centre wanted the freedom to use the allocated education funding to hire the kind of teachers that would best meet the unique needs of students. The criteria for hiring teachers for the Centre may or may not meet the hiring criteria established by the public school board, and the salary scale is likely to be less. A teacher at the Centre is a role model and facilitator of learning. S/he is committed to working with street youth, is knowledgeable about native education and is accepting of alternative lifestyle choices.

For example, the following list of ten rules was developed by the students at the Education Centre. What the students chose as being the rules and conditions of being a

member of the school reflects the spirit and culture inherent in the Boyle Street Co-op Education Centre.

1. No violence
2. No smoking indoors
3. No coming to school hammered or fried
4. No stealing
5. No sneaking out of class
6. No personal attacks
7. No visitors during school hours
8. Participate equally in chores and activities
9. Clean up after yourself
10. Respect confidentiality

The Charter

The goal of the Education Centre is to optimize students' opportunities for success and to create a positive outlook for their future and to enhance their quality of life. To fulfill these goals the Education Centre will do the following:

1. Ensure that all students have access to positive adult role models that might include parents, native elders, teachers and other community members.

2. Tailor the students' education program to address their needs and to make it relevant to their life experiences. All students are on individualized program plans.

3. Make optimum use of flexible teaching methods.

4. Offer year round registration and schooling.

5. Make use of the learning experience outside of the school setting.

6. Offer employment preparation workshops, job shadowing and job placement opportunities.

7. Offer credits for learning which takes place away from the school setting.

8. Make use of early intervention and of various support services to address the learning and social needs of students.

The Education Centre will operate under the direction of the Community Council for the Boyle Street Community Co-op. While they encourage parental involvement, it is unrealistic to expect that the Centre will be able to maintain a parent council, and the Community Council will fulfill this role.

Problems and Obstacles

1. Space. The central obstacle for the Education Centre is to find the appropriate space to host the classes. While they have been offered a variety of locations, they wanted one that was still part of the Boyle Street Community. The students have established their own code of conduct and there life style may not be conducive to hosting the school in many of the corporate office space near the Co-op.

2. Transportation. The funding through the Charter does not provide for transportation grants. If the Charter is granted by a local school board rather than the Minister, the school can access their portion of the student transportation grant through the local school board. For the students at the Boyle Street Co-op Education Centre this is of particular concern because many of the students are street-youth with little access to funds to pay for their own transportation.

3. Funding for High School Credits. While the majority of students would be eligible for high school programs they do not have the skill or knowledge base to be successful in high school level courses. Many of the students' numeracy and literacy skills are at the lower elementary level. Students already suffer from low self esteem and are not open to taking elementary level courses. This causes a problem in terms of funding. Funding for high school students is based on a per credit basis, while funding for elementary and junior high school students is on a per student basis.

4. Flexibility in Staffing. The regulations governing Charter schools stipulates that all teachers must be certified, but need not be members of the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA). In fact, unless they are seconded from an existing school district they can not be full members of the ATA, as specified under section 5 of the *Teaching Profession Act.* (Section 5 states that a teacher must be employed by a school board to be eligible for membership in the ATA. Charter schools are operated by an organization that is a society, incorporated under the Societies Act, or a company registered under Part 9 of the *Companies Act,* or a provincial corporation as defined in the *Financial Administration Act, School Act,* 24.1(1)).

This has its advantages and disadvantages. It gives the charter board flexibility in determining student -teacher ratio, and in teacher salary and contract negotiations. Staff are regulated by the *Labor Relations Code* and the *Employment Standard Code,* as well as professional codes. However, if the teacher is not a member of the ATA then s/he is not subject to the *Code of Professional Conduct* nor the *Teaching Profession Act.* Teachers are subject to the terms established by the *Council of Alberta Teaching Standards* (COATS, which deals with teacher incompetence). The disadvantages to not being a member of the ATA are essentially to the teacher in that they have no organization to bargain on their behalf, and the do not have access to their legal counsel.

5. Establishment of a School Council. In accordance with section 17 of the School Act, charter schools are required to establish a school council with the majority of members representing parents of students enrolled in the school. At the Boyle Street Co-op Education Centre the majority of students are street-youth who have either severed their connections with their families, or have families that are not available or interested in being part of a school council. It is therefore unreasonable to expect the Education Centre to establish a school council comprised of parents.

Education for the Gifted (EFG) Charter School, Elk Island School Division, Sherwood Park, Alberta

Background

The Education for the Gifted school is the first fully operating charter school in Canada. It was established through the efforts of forty parents of children who have been identified as gifted from the communities surrounding Sherwood Park. A number of the parents had been lobbying, without success, for an alternative program for the gifted and talented within the Elk Island public education system. The intent was to establish a program modeled after the Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program offered for students in grade 4 to 9 through the Calgary Board of Education. The GATE program is a school within a school. It is a program designed to meet the social, emotional and learning needs of 240 specially selected students who have been identified as being gifted. The students are identified, screened and tested, and placed in the GATE program when space becomes available.

The parent group, half of whom have a background in education, and four of whom have degrees in gifted education, saw the charter school as an opportunity to meet the needs of their children. Five information meeting were held to gain the support and commitment of parents. They formed a society and established a board of directors. In three months they had prepared the proposal for the Charter and presented it to the Elk Island School Board. Two months later the School Board voted unanimously to approve the Charter.

The Charter

The aim of the EFG charter school program is to enable gifted students to strive for excellence in an environment which is low-anxiety, positive, and supportive of the individual. They propose to design a program of differentiated instruction for all students within multi-grade pods. There will be opportunity for acceleration and enrichment,

mentorship, independent study projects, curriculum compacting, and computer-assisted instruction. Cross-curricular work and large projects are encouraged to foster challenge and creativity. Students are expected to demonstrate mastery of learning and academic excellence in areas of giftedness.

The school presently has 75 students enrolled in grades one to nine, and five children in Kindergarten. They have hired seven part-time teachers who have a designated area of specialization and experience in gifted education.

Problems and Obstacles

1. Gifted Education is Viewed as Elitist. Parents had lobbied without success for an alternative program for gifted children within the regular school system in their jurisdiction. Parents continually battle the public misconception that education for gifted students is elitist. Gifted students require special education. Under achievement and the concomitant socio-emotional problems of highly capable and talented students often has its roots in failure to provide appropriate educational experiences in the early years. As a consequence, by the time these students reach adolescence they have consciously or unconsciously put little effort into learning and now are experiencing poor achievement. Some of the parent have resorted to home schooling their children to ensure their needs are being met.

2. Political Dimension. In seeking to establish a charter school, the proponents have to be able to demonstrate that there is a real need for such a school, that they are addressing a portion of the student population whose needs aren't being met by the regular school system, and that the proposed school fills a niche within the existing public education system. The political dimension is that the public school board must acknowledge that they are not providing adequate services to meet the needs of these children. In some cases

the school boards were willing to create an alternative program or school within the existing system, while others were willing to grant the applicants charter statu·

3. Charter Pioneers in Canada. Although Alberta Education was willing to assist groups interested in applying for charter status, many of the details were yet to be worked out. The *Charter School Handbook* provided the framework for applying for a charter, however, how it was going to be interpreted by applicants, and the feasibility of the terms and conditions set by the government had to be worked out in the first round of implementation. For example, insurance companies were not clear on how to proceed in determining suitable insurance rates for a charter school because it is run by a society, and is not a private school.

Because there was no suitable existing school site in the Elk Island School Division, the Charter Board had to have a professional building re-zoned to permit redesigning the office space for a school. This required pressuring the city council to pass a by-law to permit this re-zoning. The re-designing of office space to meet the needs of school children was a novel concept in this jurisdiction. Property managers and contractors had to be educated regarding the specific needs of children regarding such things as washroom facilities, height of chalkboards and coat racks.

The president of the Elk Island Local Teachers' Association pressured the Elk Island school board to stop assisting the charter school organizing committee in establishing their school unless they paid for these consultative services. He argued that the time and money spent in helping the charter school get started could be used elsewhere to benefit all students rather than the selected few charter students.

4. Establishment of School Councils. The EFG Charter School is founded and operated by parents of students enrolled in the school. It is redundant to have an additional School Council that is comprised of parent representatives to advise the school board and

principal. There is a need, however, to have some body to ensure that students in the school meet the standards of education set by the Minister of Education and that the fiscal management of the school is in accordance with the requirements of the board. It is of concern to this group that the roles and responsibilities as well as the membership on the Charter Board and the School Council would be too similar. They argue that the Charter Board is accountable to the local school board or the Minister (whomever granted them charter school status) for the operation of the board and the school, according to the terms of the charter and provincial legislation, regulations and policies.

5. No Start-Up Funding. Alberta Education does not provide any funding for capital costs such as building sites. Signing a lease in a professional building took up the total budget allocated for plant operation. The funding is tightly allocated for specific expenditures and the Charter Board has little flexibility in re-allocating the funding to ease start-up costs. It would have been beneficial to have a portion of the budget advanced to create a cash flow to assist in the costs of renovating the office space to make it a suitable school space and for hiring teachers.

Due to the lack of cash flow and limited capital funds parent volunteers offered their expertise, services and manpower to design and renovate the new school. Many of the building materials, books and desks were donated or bought at auctions, and EFC received a grant from a local foundation.

6. Transportation. The EFG school was granted a charter from Elk Island School Division, and is therefore eligible to access their portion of student transportation grants through the School Board. However, the School Board viewed the Charter School as a program of choice, and would therefore not change the established bus route to accommodate delivering the EFG student to the school site. Instead, the students are

dropped off three blocks from the school. The EFG has arranged to have teachers or parent volunteers escort the elementary school children the three blocks to the school site.

ABC School for the Gifted and Talented, Calgary, Alberta

Background

The ABC charter school was founded by the Action For Bright Children Society (ABC) in Calgary. The ABC society was established in 1981 and is associated with the provincial organization, Alberta Association for the Gifted. The purpose of the society is to promote an awareness and understanding of the needs of children demonstrating high general intelligence and/or creative abilities and talents. ABC is an advocate group for gifted and talented children and lobby at the school, school district and government levels for the establishment of support and services for these children.

In the city of Calgary there are programs for the gifted and talented in both the public and separate school system. However, in the public system the GATE program accommodates only 240 students in grades 4 to 9. Research demonstrates that in a given population three to five percent could reasonably be identified as gifted. In the Calgary public school system there are approximately 96,000 students, and in 1995 there were only 40 places available in the GATE program. In a recent information meeting at the GATE school 600 parents attended. As a result for the demand for gifted programming in a special congregated setting the Calgary Board of Education agreed to double the capacity of the program for students in grades 4 to 9 by extending the GATE program to two more schools.

Despite the School Board's response to expanding their programming at these grade levels, the ABC society still saw a need for a special congregated program for children in Kindergarten to grade three. By their estimates, ABC projected that between 578 - 1145 students in grades k-3 in the public system could be identified as gifted and would benefit from a school for the gifted and talented. After a number of general ABC society

information meetings and in consultation with the faculty at the Center for Gifted Education at the University of Calgary, 12 members of ABC and two associates of the Centre volunteered to be part of the charter school organizing committee, and in four months developed and presented the Charter school proposal for approval by the Calgary Board of Education. The Calgary Board of Education unanimously approved the Charter, however, ABC is still negotiating with the board regarding a suitable facility for the school and has delayed start up until this can be finalized.

The ABC benefited from a well organized charter school planning committee and parents with tight linkages with the business community. These linkages are critical to raise funds for capital start up costs in a political environment that isn't fully supportive of the charter school concept, let alone one for gifted students.

The Charter

The ABC Charter school is intended to serve students in Grades 1, 2 and 3 who are gifted or who wish to challenge a program designed for gifted students. It is intended for students who need and can profit from specially planned educational services beyond the regular school program. The charter describes these children as

> those whose early academic performance is consistently superior to other children. They will possess a large storehouse of information about a wide variety of topics. Characteristics that these students possess include the ability to abstract, generalize and use high level thinking skills. The students will demonstrate an inordinate strength in a specific area, such as mathematical reasoning.

The ABC charter is based on similar goals and philosophy as the Education for Gifted Education. It differs in its emphasis on the identification and selection of gifted students. They justify the need to identify students through a screening process on the grounds that this information is necessary for teachers to recognize students' characteristics to assist them in the development of instructional programs that address students' needs and to provide additional information to parents to assist them in determining if the program

would meet the needs of their child. The charter also stipulates that "children may challenge the educational program of the charter school, however if enrollment demands exceed the capacity of the school then students will be selected on the basis of their standing after the screening."

Problems and Obstacles

1. Guidelines in Developing a Charter School Proposal. Charter schools are new to Alberta and the *Charter School Handbook* developed by Alberta Education granted much discretion regarding the form and content of charter proposals. This caused some concern for the trustees at the Calgary Board of Education who wanted more direction and guidelines from the government to determine the merits of each proposal. The reality is that the guidelines and regulations were being translated for the first time into practice and in the process these charter school pioneers where determining the areas that were in need of further refinement and those that required broader interpretation.

One area of concern for all the schools granted charter status was the minimum number of students required to keep the school operational. In the draft regulations Alberta Education required 100 registered students for each school. These numbers were unrealistic for the first year of operation. The Boyle Street Co-op Education Centre was dealing with street youth, and the likelihood of 100 students was unrealistic and unmanageable. They have 65 students registered and 25 who attend on a regular basis. The Education for the Gifted school was able to maintain 75 students. ABC school elected to use the first year of their charter status to do the necessary ground work to have the school functioning in the second year. They anticipate being able to attract 75-120 students in their first year of operation.

2. Consultation and Support in Designing the Proposal. Developing a Charter school proposal it time consuming and costly. The ABC society was fortunate to be able to

draw upon the resources of the Centre for Gifted Education at the University of Alberta. The librarian and academic staff were able to provide consultation in the development of a proposal that addressed the needs of gifted and talented students. Alberta Education was also responsive to the questions and concerns of the writers of the proposal.

3. Relationship Between Local School Boards and Charter School Boards. For the most part school boards have not openly welcomed charter schools. Charter schools require school boards to re-examine how well they are meeting the learning needs of students in their jurisdiction. The establishment of a charter school means that there is a particular educational niche that has been filled. In some cases school boards have incorporated charter school proposals as alternative programs of choice within the existing system. Edmonton Public, for example, converted three charter proposals into alternative programs. They now have a Ballet school and an all girls school. St. Albert School Division has created a school within a school concept with the establishment of Cyber-High. This is a computer based "virtual" school program. Ninety-nine students from across the province learn from certified teachers over a computer network from their homes.

The challenge to charter schools presented by local school boards was in the allocation of space suitable for the needs of the charter school, and in gaining access for charter school students to the local board's transportation system. The Calgary Board of Education is creating a policy that permits teachers from their Board to be seconded to the charter school for a term specific time without penalty in terms of salary benefits and retirement.

Conclusion

While charter schools are a recent phenomena in Canada and are still in the early stages of implementation, they have had a significant impact on public education. Charter

schools have made it necessary for educators to take another look at public education and the significance of the role it plays in society. For those school board who were approached by organizations seeking charter status it has required that they re-examine the groups of students whose needs are not being met by the existing public education system, and the range of choice in programs they have available for students and parents. Two large urban school jurisdictions have responded to charter school applicants by embracing the proposed charter as an alternative program, or in some cases an alternative school in their system.

While many anticipated that Charter schools would create a two tiered system and education for the elite, this has not been the case in Alberta. The government has granted charter status to two private schools that met the requirements and conditions for Charter school status. This has opened access to these schools to students who may otherwise not have been able to afford the tuition fee. The two schools for gifted education demonstrate that the educational needs of these students were not being met in the existing public education system. In all cases the charter schools were the result of parental effort and their commitment to creating an educational program most appropriate to the needs of their children. The school for street-youth was established by teachers and social workers committed to meeting the needs of a group of students who have no parent advocates and whose educational needs were not being met through public education.

Charter schools in Alberta are still in their embryonic stage and it is perhaps too early to determine if the concerns raised by opponents to the charter school movement will be realized. It is important, however, that the "watchdogs" of public education continue to raise questions about the growth and direction charter schools appear to be taking in the province.

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